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ABSTRACT

A teacher presents a writing exercise designed to facilitate audience-directed, critical thinking during the process of composing, that starts students thinking in terms of sorites and enthymemes. Students first read a CIA manual, "Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare," that instructs the Contra guerrillas in illegal acts and then free write a letter for 10 minutes. Students then pull out sorites and enthymemes from their free writing and use one of them as the logos of their first paper. The exercise (1) promotes self-discovery and subjective knowledge via use of the student's own voice; (2) encourages critical thinking and constructed knowledge via consideration of the intended audience; (3) empowers the students through small group work and collaboration; (4) enables the students to recognize the dynamic interrelationships among ethos, pathos, and logos by encouraging them to write emotionally; and (5) recognizes that enthymemic reasoning is the process by which the writer decides what is necessary based on what the writer desires and what the audience accepts as already known. (RS)

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Beyond the Enthymeme: Sorites, Critical Thinking, and the Composing Process

by Carolyn Hill

CCCC, Seattle, March 18, 1989, 11:45-1:00

Last year at 4Cs, Susan Dobra gave a talk on the enthymeme and how we use it to teach freshmen argumentative writing in the Rhetoric Dept. at UC Berkeley. This year, there have been several excellent papers on the enthymeme. Today, I'm going to "go beyond" the enthymeme, and talk about how we use the sorites as a tool of invention in the composing process--to encourage critical thinking and help students find commonground between themselves and whoever happens to be the audience of their argumentative paper. To illustrate the manner in which we employ the sorites, I present today an in-class free-writing exercise.

First, some definitions. When we refer to "the enthymeme," we are talking about a specific, argumentative figure: a conclusion with a reason attached.

I can't write an enthymeme
because I have never written an enthymeme.

In the above enthymeme, the conclusion is that "I can't write an enthymeme." The reason--also known as the minor premise--is that "I have never written an enthymeme." The unexpressed major premise is "Those who have never written an enthymeme, can't write an enthymeme."

When we refer to "the sorites," we are talking about another argumentative figure, which you may know as a "ratiocinatio": two or more enthymemes, joined in such a way that the conclusion of

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one enthymeme functions as a premise in the next. If there are a sufficient number of enthymemes in the sorites, one has a long chain or "ladder" of arguments, such as Seabury describes in her Feb. 1989 CCC article, "The Abstraction Ladder in Freshmen Composition." In such a ladder, or sorites, the most general and abstract claims appear at the top, and are supported by relatively specific claims at the bottom:

Mandatory peacetime draft registration (MPDR) should be continued
because MPDR is good
because MPDR benefits the US
because MPDR reduces the likelihood of nuclear war
because MPDR increases our ability to wage conventional war
because MPDR reduces draft evasion
because MPDR slowly accustoms the potential draftee to the idea that he may be sent to war.

I hope that you can see that the sample sorites is composed of at least six separate enthymemes, and that all claims except for the one at the top and at the bottom are simultaneously a conclusion and a reason for a further conclusion. A student might generate such a sorites if she came in to office hours with the policy claim at the top, and you asked her to supply a reason, then asked her to supply a reason for that reason, then asked her to supply a reason for the reason for the reason, etc.

Because that sorites drops directly down the ladder of argument, supplying reasons for reasons, I call it a MINOR PREMISE SORITES. As long as the audience accepts each of the major premises in the sorites above, and the student can prove the claim at the bottom, the audience will accept the ultimate conclusion.

However, if the audience does not accept one or more of the major premises, the student would need to employ a second kind of

sorites: the MAJOR PREMISE SORITES. This second kind of sorites does not drop straight down the ladder of argument, but takes one or more "steps" to the side, in order to supply reasons that will support unacceptable major premises.

MPDR should be continued
because MPDR is good
because MPDR benefits the US
because MPDR reduces the likelihood
of nuclear war

Increasing our ability to wage conventional war reduces the likelihood of nuclear war because increasing our ability to wage conventional war reduces the necessity of waging nuclear war

because MPDR increases our ability
to wage conventional war
because MPDR reduces draft evasion
because MPDR slowly accustoms the
potential draftee to the
idea that he may be sent to
war.

In the example that I've given you, the student discovered that her audience did not accept the major premise that "That which increases our ability to wage conventional war reduces the likelihood of nuclear war." Consequently, she had to find a reason that would support the disputed major premise. Since her audience did accept the claim that "That which decreases the necessity of nuclear war decreases the likelihood of nuclear war," she suported her disputed major premise by using the claim that "MPDR decreases the necessity of nuclear war."

Now that we have gotten the definitions out of the way, we can move on. As I have mentioned, my purpose here is to present an exercise that gets students to think in terms of sorites and

enthymemes, and that facilitates audience-directed, critical thinking during the process of invention.

Whenever possible, I like to use writing during the invention process, writing as a tool of self-discovery, in order to stress writing as a process, not a product. (Writing as a process is a new concept in the UCB Rhetoric Department, but an old concept to you, so I won't go into detail.) The exercise that I am presenting is designed to reflect this stress on process.

The three pages that you have in your hands, titled "Exercise: Free-writing a Letter to Facilitate Invention," are copies from my reader of an exercise that I have used several times in teaching argumentative writing. I use this exercise early in the semester, after they've read material on the enthymeme and the sorites and attempted to formulate a few enthymemes on their own, but before they've had to write a full paper.

After they've read the assigned text (in this case, Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare--the CIA manual that instructs the Contra guerrillas in illegal and, to some, immoral acts), we discuss issues that might be raised by the text, list those issues, and then do the exercise in class. I've described the exercise in some detail on the first of the three pages--but I'll paraphrase that description aloud. I explain free-writing to the students (I assume you all know what free-writing is, so I'll skip the explanation), reassure them that I won't be collecting what they write so they don't think that I'm their audience (at this early point in the semester, I can't be

sure that they trust me enough to write "freely" to me), and then I have them write without stopping for ten to fifteen minutes on the assigned topic, to the assigned audience.

In this case, the topic is very general: I refer them to the list of issues generated by the text during the foregoing discussion, and instruct them to write emotionally on one or more of those issues. The audience is slightly more specific: I tell them to address a trusted friend, someone with whom they can use their own voice, as if they were writing a letter. (In assigning this audience and instructing them to write emotionally, I am "stacking the deck": I am following Belenky (et al) in being a midwife to the student's ways of knowing, rather than the dispenser of knowledge, offering a forum in which the students' own views and experiences are the primary focus during the initial stages of the invention process, without reinforcing the patriarchal assumption that emotion and ethics are and should be kept separate from logic and reason.)

After they are done free-writing, we look at page two and three of the handout. These pages contain a sample free-write and a list of claims that can be pulled out of that free-write. We read the sample letter (in detail, or in abbreviated form, depending upon time available), and then we talk about how those claims can be pulled out of the sample.

Then I ask them to focus their attention on the list of claims, and we discuss which of these claims are reasons, and which conclusions. Somewhere during the process of matching reasons with conclusions in order to form enthymemes, they notice

that some claims can be both reasons and conclusions; when they notice this, we attempt to form sorites, adding any additional claims that might be necessary to bridge gaps between reasons or to support disputed major premises. During the process of forming enthymemes and sorites, there is inevitably debate over the acceptability of the various claims, which gives us an opportunity to discuss the necessity of considering one's audience when one constructs one's argument. It is in this attention to audience that their critical faculties really start to blossom and the sorites becomes a generative tool rather than a purely logical form whose conditions of validity abuse the student's original insights.

There is a fluidity, a sense of process and of growth, that results from our play with the claims and our confrontation of differing points of view. As the number of sorites and enthymemes grows, as one expands into another, as minor premise sorites branch into major premise sorites, our appreciation and understanding of the issues expand, simultaneous with the realization that reasoning appropriate in one rhetorical situation would be inappropriate in another, that different audiences accept different major premises, have different worldviews, and approach issues at different levels of abstraction.

And this realization of the existence of differing worldviews moves us and the sorites beyond purely logical concerns, beyond formal logic, to recognition of the ethos and pathos appeals which underlie the various claims. Indeed, these appeals are inextricable from these claims, as is demonstrated by adjectives in claims

such as "The heinous CIA manual encourages nefarious no-goodery," or the ethical and emotional dimensions revealed in the homilies used as reasons: "You can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar" and "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

After we've done all we can with the sample, I ask them to turn to their own free-write and pull out a list of their claims, to decide which are reasons, which are conclusions, which are both, and to compose a sorites of their own. From that sorites, they are to pick a single enthymeme that will serve as the basis of the logos of their first paper. (Later in the semester, when we redo this exercise with different texts, they pull out a sorites, rather than a single enthymeme.)

In choosing that enthymeme, they must consider the attitudes and beliefs of their paper's audience--a different audience than that of their free-write; an audience that, by assignment, is one which does not agree with their paper's conclusion prior to reading the paper. In addition, they must consider the five-page paper length: some enthymemes in the sorites are too abstract or general to be successfully argued in five pages, some enthymemes have major premises that the audience would find objectionable, some enthymemes simply would not interest their audience.

As a follow-up to this exercise, I instruct them to share their enthymeme (or sorites) with the other members of a small group of fellow classmates (they choose their own groups), and have them discuss the appropriateness of that enthymeme to their audience's concerns. Then they are to refine that enthymeme as

they see fit--they may even turn around and re-do this free-writing exercise using that enthymeme, rather than the original issue, as their starting point.

I feel that this exercise embodies many of our key concerns: it promotes self-discovery and subjective knowledge via use of one's own voice; it encourages critical thinking and constructed knowledge via consideration of one's audience; it empowers the students through small group work and collaboration, permitting me to function as Belenky's "midwife" rather than The Dispenser of Knowledge; it avoids the too-narrow rationality against which Rideout cautions by focusing on the fluidity of the invention process; it enables students to recognize the dynamic interrelations among ethos, pathos, and logos by encouraging them to write emotionally; and it reflects Gage's recognition that enthymemic reasoning is the process by which the writer decides what is necessary based on what the writer desires and what the audience accepts as already known.

EXERCISE:
FREE-WRITING A LETTER TO FACILITATE INVENTION

Here's a trick to use to get yourself thinking in terms of enthymemes and sorites.

After reading Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare, choose an individual in your life whom you trust enough to write honestly to, and then free-write a "letter" to that person, expressing your reaction to the text. Write whatever pops into your head and don't put on a false face or worry about grammar or completing sentences and thoughts. To free-write properly, force yourself to write for ten minutes or more without stopping (no lifting your pen from the page or hesitating to pick just the right word--write "um um um" if you draw a blank).

We'll do this exercise in class. After you're done with the free-writing, we'll look at the following two pages, read aloud the sample free-written letter, and talk about how the claims below can be pulled out of the letter and recombined to form enthymemes and sorites.

In trying out different combinations, we'll go through the process of identifying which claims are conclusions, which are reasons, which are major premises, and which are "something else"; in constructing sorites, we'll talk about which of the claims are the most abstract and general, and which are the most specific, and note how value judgements and policy claims tend to be supported by claims of fact or cause and effect. In discussing how to pull assertions from the letter, we'll talk about active vs. passive verbs, nominalization, insuring that the agent is in the subject, etc.

Then I'll ask you to do the same thing to your letter--pull out the claims and play around with them, attempting to form enthymemes and sorites.

(If you're having trouble locating the claims in your letter, circle the verbs, underline the objects, and put brackets around the subjects of your sentences, then mechanically list all the subjects in one column, all the verbs in a second column, and all the objects in a third column, taking care that you keep the material in each sentence together on one line and separate from the material of other sentences. Then fill in whatever is missing on each line: if you have a subject, but no object on a line, supply an object, etc.)

The Sample Letter:

Dear Paul,

I'm in my rhetoric class and I'm supposed to write for 10 minutes (10 minutes!) without stopping to someone I trust--and you're it. (Glad, eh?) Anyway, we're reading the CIA's heinous manual for nefarious no-goodery in Nicaragua and we're gonna' write a paper on it and I'm supposed to scribble my thoughts here, so I'm scribbling.

The Manual makes me mad--real mad--and scared. It doesn't seem right that we do all these illegal things and end up murdering innocent civilians, all in the name of democracy. The only democracy we seem to care about is our own; every other state can go to hell in a handbasket, with our good intentions paving their way! This stuff we do--this hate-filled dogma we spew about Communism, this illegal arms deal to terrorists for Christ's sake, this buildup in the Gulf and readiness of ruddy-cheeked Reagan to invoke martial law in the US--on and on, it makes me sick. And surely those who watch us in our hypocrisy are turned away by our aggressive posturing and bloody dealing with crooks. (I'm losing track here...um, um.) It doesn't work!

If we were nice to people and helped them, we wouldn't have to beat them into submission: "Do unto others..." and "You can catch more flies with honey..." and "Hell, no, we won't go." (Um, um, um--) We could be blackmailed as we appear to be being blackmailed in

Forget that. How come the news media doesn't report this stuff? Why is the American public so sanguine about these outrages? Has our education failed us in some way?

Claims Extracted From the Sample Letter:

The heinous CIA Manual encourages nefarious no-goodery.

Revelation of US activities in Nicaragua makes some Americans mad and scared.

The US engages in illegal activities.

The US murders innocent civilians.

The US only cares about democracy at home.

The US's good intentions make life hell abroad.

US hypocrisy turns off the very people we hope to attract.

The US spews hate-filled dogma about Communism.

Reagan's arms deal to Iran is illegal/encourages terrorism.

The US is building up its military presence in the Persian Gulf.

Reagan wants to invoke martial law in the US.

US activities in Nicaragua and around the globe undermine democracy at home and abroad.

US activities don't produce the results that we want.

"Being nice to/helping" people attracts people and makes violence and less necessary.

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

"You can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar."

"Hell, no, we won't go."

US dealings with crooks and our illegal activities makes the US susceptible to blackmail.

The news media don't report these activities (in full).

Many Americans don't care/aren't bothered by these activities.

Our education "fails" us (doesn't prepare us to care/be bothered by such activity).